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## MTA rescue must be effective — and equitable

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In hard times, economic fairness is more important than ever, which may explain why the Ravitch plan to bail out the Metropolitan Transportation Authority has stalled in Albany. It asks businesses and residents 80 miles from Times Square to pay the same payroll tax as Brooklynites. It imposes tolls on the East River bridges, while residents of Manhattan are squirmed around within the borough, toll-free, in taxi cabs.

Yet all who live and work in the orbit of New York City have a stake in the region's transit system. Leaving the MTA no recourse but to raise fares by 25 percent and slash service will make the entire metropolitan area less competitive, cost tens of thousands of jobs, and prolong the economic downturn.

We need a smarter, leaner MTA, which almost certainly

means deferring expensive expansion projects like the Second Avenue Subway unless and until the federal government can provide the bulk of the funding. But the region has to hold up its own end as well. A graduated payroll tax, with the rate proportioned on proximity to the city, may be one piece. Another is a smarter, fairer toll plan than bridge tolls alone.

Tolls aren't pleasant to talk about, but neither are the alternatives. A good starting point for discussion is this stark fact: Every motor vehicle trip into the Manhattan Central Business District (CBD) imposes, on average, \$30 worth of delay costs on the drivers of other vehicles that are on the road at the same time.

That's right. Add up the seconds of additional delay that my car trip, or yours, inflicts on each of the hundreds of cars and trucks in our slipstream, then factor those seconds by the time value to each driver and trucker,

and you get \$30, on average.

Here's a second fact: The cost is — not surprisingly — higher during rush hours but less outside of the peak.

And a third: Driving is more price sensitive than people realize. Experience shows that drivers are quite creative and flexible in their response to price changes; they reschedule or switch to transit in significant numbers.

Fact number four: Fairness is essential. Any toll plan must be as nearly universal as possible. No group can be exempt.

So here's a plan based on these facts:

- Toll all cars driven into the CBD at a time-variable rate, from \$2 to \$10 (inbound only).
- Charge double for trucks, but no more than once daily.
- Excuse medallion cabs from the toll but raise their fares by one-third, to "capture" the majority of circulating CBD traffic and prevent Manhattanites from getting a free pass.

■ Provide no "offsets" for other tolls, to ensure that all driving commuters share the pain.

Using a powerful computer model that has been vetted by local and national experts, we estimate that this toll plan — we modestly call it the Kheel-Komanoff Plan — will generate \$1.7 billion in net revenues, or more than double the take from the Ravitch plan.

This revenue is sufficient to make all city buses free, which would set off a revolution in surface transit by expediting boarding, and boosting bus travel speeds up to 20 percent. And it would allow the MTA to cut off-peak subway fares, which would reduce rush-hour usage and ensure that the subway system isn't overstressed.

The result would be three enormous boons to help our region through the hard times: avoidance of service cuts and fare hikes, a permanent financial break for bus riders, and big improvements in traffic flow across New York City, reaching 20 percent within the CBD.

Just as hiking payroll taxes in Suffolk County by the same rate as the Bronx isn't fair, neither is having some drivers pay for congestion while others get a free pass. Our plan ends the entitlement of free bridges equitably and with productivity gains that can hasten our region's recovery.

That's fair, effective and essential. And residents of the region need to let their Albany leaders know that ours is the kind of plan hard times require.



Ted Kheel (left) and Charles Komanoff, both longtime transit advocates, are, respectively, a labor lawyer and an economist.

